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## A POSTSCRIPT ON RUSKIN.

BY VERNON LEE.

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“ . . . . Through such souls alone  
God, stooping, shows sufficient of His light  
For us i' the dark to rise by. . . .”

COMING, as it did, when all England was engrossed by the tragic practicalities of the war, the death of Ruskin failed to bring home, as the death of every great master normally does, the full sense of what this man has done and can do for our more than momentary dignity and welfare. The case being such, it is better to come, as I do, when others have long since had their say; since there is now hope of some attention from those whom I would try to bring back to a study of Ruskin, by enumerating some of the possibilities and habits of thought and feeling which I am myself aware of owing, at least in definite and imperious form, to the teachings of this great prophet of righteous happiness. And the attention I should most desire is that of the younger of my possible readers and those of most advanced opinions; because I am convinced that, far-spreading as was his influence on his immediate contemporaries, and large as is the debt (though often second-hand and unacknowledged) due to him by the following generation, the very best of Ruskin's efficacy can be expected in the future: an efficacy more limited, perhaps, but more genuine and fruitful, unhelped, but unmarred also, by community of prejudice and error, and founded solely and safely on similarity of feeling and of aspiration. For the intuitions of Ruskin's many-sided genius were recommended to the majority of his contemporaries—a majority larger than could really assimilate them—by the system of symbolical metaphysics and dogmatic morals in which he set them with so tedious an ingenuity; but our modern habits of thought have reduced this artificial frame-

work to little more than a dreary litter, which wearies and vexes at every step. It is, therefore, high time to point out the genuine, though unconscious, organic system which unifies all that is living and fruitful in Ruskin's work, the vital synthesis of one of the richest and noblest and really best balanced of creative personalities.

More essentially than almost any other illustrious writer, Ruskin has been a giver of great gifts. He has opened out to us many and various fields of æsthetic and imaginative enjoyment, which we can sum up under a number of rough headings—Turner, Gothic, the Alps, Venice, mediæval painting, imaginative topography, certain botanical and geological interests, and many of the most essential and also the most recondite qualities of art; and he has, with the unerringness of unconscious instinct, united them all in a scheme of living, nay, rather of feeling and facing life, which is the spontaneous outcome of his character—the very flesh and blood of his soul given us to partake of. Moreover, this attitude towards life (higher than Goethe's or Carlyle's, more complete than Wordsworth's or Renan's, more human than Spinoza's or Emerson's) has the active, and at the same time contemplative, satisfactoriness of being in the widest sense religious—how truly so those best can judge who will strip away the mere ecclesiastical symbolism and theological metaphysics from Ruskin's genuine and spontaneous thought: religious, in his detachment from all material possession or social vanity, his capacity to take of things only their spiritual use, their ideal fruition; religious, in his desire for union with all creatures through gentleness and sharing; religious, above all, in his passionate power of communion with all the universe through love and wonder. No writer has felt more strongly the spiritual man's disgust with the narrow utilitarianism (not Bentham's nor Mill's, truly) which looks upon the world as so much food and fuel, hides and wool; and no writer (not even Tolstoi) has felt greater wrath at the exploitation of human beings by other human beings. In the same way that men were sacred in Ruskin's eyes, so also was the visible and sensible universe; because he felt (expressing his feeling in the formulas of God's works and God's children) that both the universe and man should stand in relationship of spirituality with the spiritual human being.

This leads me to begin what must needs be a very rough-and-

ready enumeration of Ruskin's many and many-sided achievements, by protesting against the common belief, shared in dogmatic moments by himself, that Ruskin was unable to sympathize with progress and was hostile to everything modern. His early education made him, indeed, impervious to many sides of science, and he had neither time nor disposition to exchange the theological notions he had received ready-made for any kind of philosophy. But the progress which Ruskin sneered at and the modernness which he anathematized were, after all, the very same which distressed and disgusted so different a man as Renan—progress which considered science merely as an instrument for commercial production, or, at best, for sanitary improvement, and modernness which regarded philosophical thought as a useful solvent of inconvenient spiritualities. We must remember that "modern" meant for Ruskin, not our latter-day habits of mind, already full of sympathy with the past and impatience of the present and tinged so deeply with reluctance and regret, but the mental habits, if "mental" they might be called, of the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century; of that period of chaotic materialism, of hand to mouth ruthless egoism, against which not only Carlyle came to protest, but Karl Marx also. The wrath of Ruskin forestalled, despite exaggeration and dogmatism, a way of feeling which the scientific and philosophical development of our day, nay, even the increased habit of material welfare, will make more and more usual in the future.

Moreover, I would point out that Ruskin showed equal abhorrence for what is the very reverse of modern and of progress, the brutish neglect of the beautiful work of the past, the disrespect to nature's fruitfulness and cleanness resulting from centuries of sloth and barbarism, such as he saw it in Italy, in France, and in the Canton Valais. The diseased newness of Leeds or Manchester and the diseased decay of Venice or Verona affected him, equally, as the desecration of the soul's sanctuary. And the deeper science, the wider practicality, of coming times will justify the noble priestly wrath he showed. But my meaning about this will become clearer, and Ruskin's meaning also, in the course of enumerating a few of the interests he brought into life, and then of summing up his attitude towards life as a whole.

And to begin with art.

The action of Ruskin has been to break down all narrow dilet-

tanteism, even of men like Wincklemann and Reynolds, and show that art was sprung from daily life and fit for daily life's consumption. Without ever belittling (as was the fashion in those days of Buckle and Taine) that creative genius which is the flower of one epoch but also the seed of another, Ruskin insisted on the participation of the humblest skill and sentiment in all the great work of the past, and indicated clearly, even if he did not formulate, that masterpieces owed the spontaneous appreciation which they got to the existence of artistic forms and qualities like their own in the commonest household objects. Moreover, while teaching his reader to take interest in the constructive reason of all architecture, Ruskin went far beyond considering this constructive reason as the essential of architectural beauty. The passages in the "Seven Lamps," and elsewhere, on the evidences of living interest, of seemingly capricious but in reality instinctively meaningful alteration of proportions and relations of line, curve, mass and surface, forestall to my mind one of the most important discoveries which scientific æsthetics will have some day to register.

And here I would point out that, in order to get Ruskin's full meaning, we must never separate his writings from those wonderful illustrations which tell us all the things words can never say. It is in them that he has given us the real quality of mediæval architecture. Nay, more than that; he has given us, in his rendering of balcony and window tracery, of the pine-cone brick-work of steeples, of the feathery keenness of lance-like iron-work, not merely the æsthetic loveliness, but also the imaginative fascination, of Venice and Verona. Think how even Goethe saw those towns, and how *we* see them. Well, the difference is due, two-thirds, to Ruskin. Similarly with the Alps. Look at his drawings, in "Modern Painters," of the Mont Blanc range. These things make one forevermore feel the uplifting, the budding of clustered peaks, the sweep of moraine and avalanche tracks, the cling of forests, and add to the reality the charm of *his* having seen and felt it.

Ruskin gave us one of our greatest pleasures (gave it consciously and as an artistic factor in life)—topography; teaching us to feel the countries growing, forming, as we move through them; teaching us to evoke the haunting presence of scenery, on dreary days or evenings, over maps, the very names of stations growing delightful, and a talk about miles and levels and surveyors' details becoming fraught with delight, a poem.

This art of getting the imaginative essence of things, of combining the mysterious associations, subtle, microscopic, between lovelinesses of all kinds, between all evidences of noble life, which Ruskin gave us, enabled him also to point out the real literary quality which great paintings (Turner's, for instance, in the "Loire side" and "St. Gothard") got by mere selection of visible items. Nor must we think of Ruskin's analysis of these pictures as mere ingenious exercises like those first taught by Lessing, which distract the mind from real artistic quality. What Ruskin taught on the largest scale and by unconscious system was, not to substitute the aims of one art for those of another, but to unite in our mind separate imaginative delights, actual and remembered, and to multiply them indefinitely by each other till the whole world became an organic unity, not by mere links of causality or category, but by the vivifying sense of love and wonder. Ruskin felt all things with the energy and complexity due to previous feeling. The mere titles of chapters and illustrations ("Venga Medusa," "The Locks of Typhon," "The Sea Foundations") show his impressions to have been like tones rich in harmonies which are chords in themselves, and many of his records of mere scientific observations seem to be throbbing with imaginative pleasure—the record, for instance, of how he calculated the erosion of a certain mountain, and that delightful statement, one of his most beautiful bits of writing, "the true high cirri never cross a mountain in Europe. How often have I hoped to see an Alp rising through and above their level-laid and rippled fields." This culminates, perhaps, in the great chapter of "Modern Painters" on "The Use of Mountains": to give motion to water, change to air and diversity to soil; and we may add, after this chapter, to refresh, ennoble, and enlarge the soul of man. How in such passages as these Ruskin awakens our imaginative sympathy with the universe, teaching us to multiply, for instance, by the knowledge whence the great rivers come, the solemnity of the sight of them in defile or in estuary. What interest all this realization of life brings into life. Surely, he who should feel habitually as Ruskin teaches us to feel, merely in this one chapter, would be rich with the bare necessities, and certainly would want no amusements or excitements, even on a rainy day, knowing the snow to be falling, the brooks to be rushing, behind the mist on the mountains. Nay, he would have things to look forward to as

others look forward to the newspaper or the theatre. What dramas are the skies preparing? What pageants will be held at sunset?

Instead of which, we privileged folk—well, let us drop a veil over the futilities, the wasteful vanities, with which we cheat our tedious leisure, while the leisure, harder won, of our less fortunate brethren is employed, let us say, in reading betting news and accounts of murders and executions; a vicious circle of overwork and idleness, of waste and lack of opportunity. Here, on the contrary, we are taught by Ruskin a virtuous circle of virtuous efficacy: intellectual and æsthetic interests being not merely wholesome and ennobling in themselves, but freeing us from the pursuit, often unjust, and always selfish, of superfluous materialism and wasteful vanities, liberating our minds and lives, and incidentally the lives and minds of others, from the grindstone. From the grindstone. This metaphor inevitably enters my mind with the remembrance of another passage of just such passionate imagination, in this same volume of “*Modern Painters*”—the description of Turner’s “*Wind Mill*.” “Turning round a couple of stones for the mere pulverization of human food,” he writes, “is not noble work for the winds.” The half page gives the essence of Ruskin’s philosophy, because it gives the whole of his strong harmonious mode of feeling. It does more than merely show the religious quality of the man, which places him alongside of Isaiah, of St. Francis, and the great nameless makers of primeval myths, to whom the forces of nature are neither masters nor servants, but brethren, recreated (as all things are recreated in the act of thought) in the image of his own higher nature. It shows, also, his very noble and very original intuition of the comparative values of different kinds of work, his craving for such work as shall be fruitful, not merely for the stomach, but for the soul.

Some of us see the wind as a thing to grind corn, and the stream as a thing to spin cotton; and we have, many of us, alas, from lazy conformity with the baser practicality of our time, grown almost to think that setting natural forces (even if polluted in so doing) thus to provide us food and clothing, is doing them a kind of honor, allowing them, mere soulless things, to share the life of creatures having minds, to wit, ourselves. Ruskin has shown (despite his theology asserting that the world was made to be man’s kitchen-garden) that our human life was worth partici-

pating in, that our human souls existed ("where a soul can be discerned") just in proportion as either employs nature for something beyond preparing food or providing clothing. He has not been hoodwinked by fine phrases about "saving human labor." The labor is not saved if it is set merely to other work, as stupefying and as merely hand to mouth as that you took it from. There is gain only if, setting the winds to grind and the waters to spin, we set the men and women hitherto employed at loom or grindstone to watch the winds and streams, to feel their life and rejoice in it. There is gain even if, by reducing natural forces to drudgery, a certain proportion among us, having ceased to use our muscles for such purposes, employ our minds in thoughts of higher knowledge and wider kindliness. But, in reality, we employ this privileged freedom of mind and time mainly to calculate how to get more out of the natural forces—more money out of their produce and more satisfactions of vanity out of the money. This passage forms a fit introduction to Ruskin's economical and socialistic views.

Economical and socialistic, in the sense neither of orthodox political economy nor of ordinary socialism. Ruskin's scheme, elaborated with little knowledge of economic science or of the discipline of science of any kind, strikes us at first as a hopeless jumble. He is an individualist, an opponent of collectivism. He has a theory of the intrinsic value of labor which seems to come out of some Marxian pamphlet, and, by its side, definitions of equitable exchange and summings up of the dependence of value on imaginative and emotional causes, which foreshadow the deepest analysis of Tarde's "*Logique Sociale!*" But when we look at Ruskin's books on economy in the light of his other work, we find the clue through this confusion, and we rejoice that his lack of scientific training and his unbridled personal assertiveness have made him misconceive the very subject treated by other economists, and answer them so often at cross purposes. For, while the followers of Mill or Marx have amply furnished us with treatises (more or less logical and more or less narrow-minded) on the question of how and by whom wealth is really produced, Ruskin, following only his passionate human sense, has given us what is wholly different: a theory how wealth ought to be spent. This way of looking at the subject (notwithstanding some wrong-headedness and much quibbling) enlarges and corrects political econ-



omy even on the mere scientific side, introducing the consideration of factors such as are nowadays beginning to sweep away the recent notions of "historical materialism," and setting the question of productive and unproductive labor in a more perfect manner than any other writer on economics, orthodox or socialist, whom I know. I could quote twenty passages from the "Political Economy of Art" and from "Unto this Last" alone, which, were they taken to heart, would improve not only economic theory as propounded in books, but economic practice as it enters into the life of every well-to-do man and woman. That national wealth is meaningless save as equivalent of national happiness; that he who spends deals not with his money only, but with the mode of occupation, the present bodily and spiritual welfare, the future misery or comfort, of those his money sets to work; that every object of luxury consumed without improvement to the consumers' bodily or spiritual efficiency, is so much human labor destroyed, and so much human life and happiness wasted; that, in fact there is as much morality or immorality in the mode of spending wealth as in that of acquiring it, and that every prosperous person is, however unconsciously, the honest or dishonest steward of his community; these are the chief headings of Ruskin's political economy. These are the truths which Ruskin has guessed in their main features, and elaborated, with the unerring sight of deepest sympathy, in every kind of detail. And they are truths which, if we saw and felt them thoroughly, would, as I hinted, add a great new factor to all economic problems: the factor of moral and imaginative selection, of an *idée force* (in M. Fouillée's phrase) acting as an economic determinant.

I have spoken of moral and imaginative preference. I ought to have added, to do justice to Ruskin's special genius, "and æsthetic." For it seems to me that Ruskin shows, in his own person, that such aspirations after justice, kindliness and simplicity of life are the result of a wide sweep of imagination, which feels distant evil as discordant with good at hand; and, even more, of that habit of harmony, that craving for contemplative satisfaction, which make up the æsthetic nature. I have insisted on the importance of this æsthetic side for an even weightier reason: that a belief in it is the deepest basis of Ruskin's hopes for social improvement. Increased sympathy and self-restraint, usually the only factors thereof which moralists take into consideration, are

thought of (or rather *felt*) by Ruskin as the means of substituting the interests and pleasures of the imagination for the exorbitant interests and pleasures of sensuality, of vanity or of acquisitiveness.

There would be food enough and shelter enough and leisure in the world for every one, such is Ruskin's unformulated thought, if every one would be satisfied with such superfluous wealth, with such superior power, as is represented by the spiritual possession and spiritual multiplication of everything that is and can be beautiful. Like every great dream of universal happiness, Ruskin's conception of God's kingdom on earth is that of a kingdom of the spirit. "None of us yet know," he wrote in "The Eagle's Nest," "what fairy palaces we may build of beautiful thought, bright fancies, satisfied memories, noble histories, faithful sayings, treasure-houses of precious and restful thoughts, which care cannot disturb nor pain make gloomy, nor poverty take away." And the importance of the teaching of Ruskin is largely, as I said at the beginning, that he gave us not merely the conception of a higher, wider, less selfish and more active life, but that he gave us, in the unintended revelations of his own personality, the proof that such a life can actually be lived. No man, perhaps, has ever possessed so great a power of living in all the things which increase, instead of diminishing, by use and sharing; from the great mountain, whose image ennobled further the nobility of the buildings with which he connected it, as in the splendid Matterhorn passage in the "Stones of Venice," down to the rooms of the inn at Champagnole, where he "rejoiced the more in every pleasure that it was not new." I have chosen this illustration because it exemplifies what he was fond of preaching, the increasing fertility of all beautiful and noble things under the faithful tillage of our love.

Alas, such tillage is beyond the power of most men, and few, very few of us, ill-organized and unselected creatures, life's paupers or invalids, however rich in money or robust in body, can "see and possess royally," as Ruskin did, the spiritual kingdoms of the earth. Mankind at large, leisured and well-to-do, and even intellectually cultivated, has not the health or energy or staying power to live or wish to live in such a kingdom of the spirit. Even apart from sensuality, sloth or the weakling's need for excitement, we still require, for the most part, to be kept alive by

Ibsen's "vital lies," ballasted by prejudice, stiffened into consistency by vanity, and tempted into activity by every lust and covetousness; and, as for the incentives of imaginative pleasure and higher sympathy, if we had only them, we should most of us die in the workhouse. We are not very highly evolved or well organized creatures so far. Ruskin could never realize this. And, on the whole, it is fortunate he could not, since, although it made him unjust and abusive where others would be merely self-contemptuous and hopefully patient, it enabled him to fulfil his vocation as a great spiritual precursor. Every religion, in its noblest parts, is, after all, a *counsel of perfection*, ennobling and lastingly efficacious just in proportion as it can influence only the chosen few. And the highest ethical use of a religion is thus to influence, thus to select, the capable, and to produce in them a higher standard of capacity for those below to rise by. Ruskin's counsel of perfection is different from those we are accustomed to, but it is not, therefore, more far-fetched. It is not more unlikely that mankind may some day seek its happiness in mountains, noble works of art, generous thoughts and all the sharable enjoyments called æsthetic, than that mankind will learn to love its neighbor like itself. It need not be more difficult to live in and by an inner harmony of one's soul, than to live in God: who knows, indeed, whether it would not be identically the same process?

And now, before concluding this very rough and ready tribute of gratitude to Ruskin, this seems the right place to forestall another objection likely to be made both by believer and agnostic, that Ruskin, namely, could frame what has been called his religion of beauty, because he had the help, potent in reality or in delusion, of the other religion, the orthodox one, of which he is forever talking. Now I am, on the contrary, struck more and more by the fact, that the dogmatic part of this religion not only masked from us much of the vital value of Ruskin's nature, but hampered him even more in some of his greatest, most natural conceptions: a materialistic and anthropomorphic philosophy, a cut and dried unpsychological ethic, elaborated in a comparatively ignorant and cruel past, and handed down, with every kind of misinterpretation and quibble, by minds deficient in all historical sense—this, which is the dogmatic part of every orthodox creed, could never help the religious reality of such a soul as

Ruskin's. Like every great poetical mind, Ruskin's was naturally pantheistic; not by dint of metaphysical abstraction and the reduction of all differences to a uniformity of nothingness, but through the conception of all things in the terms of a pure and ardent human spirit. There is loving sympathy in his thought of the leaves gently making room for one another, and tragic solemnity in that of the erosion, the gradual leaching away, of the great mountain. To him, as to St. Francis, as to Goethe and Shelley, such processes were not mechanical but archangelic. But the creed in which he had been brought up interfered; and instead of showing us nature as he felt it, desiring, loving, struggling, living, he was bound to explain it as a passive machinery in the hands of a manlike and capricious deity. I put aside his unceasing quibbling to explain the right or wrong of an artistic form, the superiority of a Gothic balustrade over a Palladian, the fineness of a rock by Turner and the wretchedness of a rock by Salvator Rosa, nay, questions of veneering and undercutting, by reference to the Decalogue, the Prophets or Deuteronomy. The very crudeness of these things renders them merely wearisome, but intellectually harmless. But this dogmatic belief actually warped Ruskin's thought and checked his spontaneous intentions.

No man was gifted with greater natural intuition of the organic, of affinity, growth, change, and all those harmonious complexities which we, remarking them, call "tendencies" in things; yet he allowed himself to think only in terms of deliberate willing, ordering, arranging, rewarding, punishing, in terms of humanly devised machinery and wretched human jurisprudence. With his wonderful eye for everything that told of life, he yet intellectually knew of only creation and its theological correlative, annihilation. How much finer would have been his historical conception of art, had he understood that the death (as he calls it) of a form of art is not a judgment from heaven, but a process which has its beneficent side, the possible preparation for a fresh living form. Nay, his habit of looking at the universe in a way not essentially different from that of Dante, had an even worse effect, depriving Ruskin, in a serious degree, of real hope in the future. The notion, the result of modern psychology from Spinoza and Kant downwards, that beauty is the name given to certain relations of proportion, visible or imaginative, in harmony with man's organic wants, this view, so really

spiritual because subjective, and corresponding so happily with that of moral fitness and its imperative, was one which naturally fitted in with Ruskin's æsthetic intuitions, with all his discoveries about form, composition and imaginative effect, and with his aspirations after a "spiritual kingdom" it harmonized so perfectly. But Ruskin believed that beauty was a sort of entity, put by the Creator into things, and which it is the duty of man thence to extract; and, thinking thus, he naturally felt that the preference for inferior art was a form of wickedness, and that artistic appreciation must be taught with an enormous amount of theological reviling to a perverse mankind. For, as I said before, the worst effect of his theological bias upon Ruskin is its depriving him of real faith, of hope in possible improvement. The idea of spontaneity, like the idea of evolution, is carefully excluded by his dogmatism. Now, the discovery or invention of evolution has given us a habit of conceiving life as spontaneity and adaptation, above all, unconscious, necessary improvement, as distinguished from a continual unquiet readjustment and effort of our little human will; and with it a kind of wider optimistic finality, or a possibility, humbly and hopefully, of doing without finality at all. It is instructive to compare with Ruskin's harassed feeling, that all will go wrong in the world unless it be converted to his notions, the hopeful serenity of even such a pessimist as Renan; his reassuring certainty, even in his plays and dialogues, that the moral world will live through every crisis, and that the good and evil we fight and mourn about are only our small human ways of looking at the movements of a universe which takes care of itself. Whereas, alas, the universe of Ruskin is (despite its singing streams and rejoicing mountains) inert, mechanical; a dead weight lugged about by a personal (and on the whole inefficient) creator, and requiring to be poked and scolded by Ruskin himself.

And to sum up. When we have separated what Ruskin can give the future from what (unfortunately in the long run, though fortunately at the moment) Ruskin got foisted on him by the past, I think we shall see that in Ruskin, as in every other great prophet, the valuable, the efficacious element was, not what he intended to teach, but the personality, the type of human power in nature, which we feel through all his teachings. Ruskin's deliberate intention was to place Turner above Claude, Gothic above

Renaissance, the Middle Ages above modern times, hand labor above machinery, Protestantism above Catholicism, and Biblical interpretation above scientific. But this programme matters little and soon will matter not all, these questions sinking more and more into squabbles about definitions and crusades about names, the embodiment thereof in his work being marked by injustice, violence, sophistry, and self-contradiction. But, meanwhile, the real man, the organized, intuitive, unhesitating creature of perception and aspiration, has subdued all this to his unconscious purposes, and has left us the priceless teachings of his true preferences and antipathies. He has shown us art, history, nature, enlarged, transformed and glorified through the loving energy of his spirit. He has shown us a scheme of life in which greater justice for all would result merely from greater happiness of endowment of every one. He has given us an example of contemplative union with all living things, and in his contemplative ecstasy made all noble things alive. The most larklike soul of our time, he sings at heaven's gates, and his song makes heaven's gates be everywhere above us. Greatest of all his gifts, he has given us himself: himself unconscious of all the baser temptations which we struggle with, and absorbed in happy, fruitful thoughts and feelings, sharable with every free-born spirit. His work, as I said before, is comparatively useless and positively supremely useful, because it is a counsel of perfection; and one might say, without exaggeration, that the highest meaning we can put into this ceaseless jostle of rapacities and vanities which we now call real life, would be the hope that the day may come when all mankind, or mankind's flower at least, may be allowed by circumstance and be capable by endowment to seek their most natural happiness as this real man has really done.

VERNON LEE.